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MAIL SUPPLEMENT TO THE HONGKONG DAILY PRESS.

HONGKONG, WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 2ND, 1891.

THE CHINESE GOVERNMENT.

The question is often debated, but without any definite result, whether the Government of China should be considered Imperial or Federal. Sometimes the provincial authorities seem to be so powerful that they disregard the Central Government. Their administrations are autonomous; their budgets are entirely provincial, paying tribute only in various forms to the Imperial Government. Their interests are held to be so much separated as in certain cases to appear outside observers partially antagonistic. Over all provincial affairs the Central authority is seen to exercise a feeble and futile sway. The very theory of a Central council has almost failed to be a factor in the estimation of foreigners for their own convenience, and in so far as the Great Powers have kept their respective establishments, which, however, never succeeded in giving any practical effect to the principles which they had established, that is to say, their efforts to enforce Imperial control over provincial administration have been hitherto without any effect. For our own part we have always held the opinion that until the representatives had attained a higher degree of law which commands public confidence and to all the residents, British, Chinese, and Foreign, are alike subject. In Shanghai there are many Courts as there are nationalities, each governed by a different system, and with the possibility of conflicting jurisdictions.

At a first glance it may seem somewhat extravagant that a small island like Hongkong should have a Governor and an Administration of the same status as those of a immense territory like Queensland. Examination, however, will show that the demands of Hongkong in the matter of Government are more important than those of the Australian Colony. In the latter there are four hundred thousand persons of British race, following British traditions, and in effect governing themselves. The Governor is appointed by Her Majesty the Queen is little more than a figurehead, and is responsible only for the safety of his own protection and in order to obtain the advantage of the lower rate of duty. The change would likewise bring a very large increase to the revenue if the present rate of duty were retained at the present time. It would, however, be worth the consideration of the traffic in shares—most of which have a purely gambling character and a very fair subject for taxation—the duty on completed transfers might be fixed at two cents per \$100. At present the duty on shares covers on an average probably not less than ten transactions, so that, if this demand is not large, the Government's capacity to tax is not great. In Hongkong, on the other hand, with two hundred thousand Chinese to govern, a population of an allied race and whose traditions are widely different from our own, administrative capacity is an essential qualification in the Governor and in the heads of the various departments, and the best men available ought to be obtained for the positions. To reduce Hongkong to the level of a third-rate Government would be a most disastrous mistake. The following remarks, which appeared in the *Times* on the occasion of the celebration of the Colony's jubilee, may be quoted:—

"Hongkong is in a manner the ambassador for Western commerce in the East, and under the shelter of a strong and enlightened flag it has become the starting point and the home of the numberless enterprises which the energy of European men and the commercial aptitude of the Chinese are congenitally inculcated. . . . Hongkong acts as a lightning conductor to dissipate and neutralise the impact of highly electrical tendencies of an opposite character. It has the British Empire behind it, and the consciousness of this security gives free play to the harmonising effects of unrestricted commercial intercourse and adds weight to the position of the Minister at Peking. The great Bank that oils the wheels of commerce and of enterprise in our midst is possible only through the security afforded by the prestige attaching to a British possession, and it may be confidently foretold that so long as China remains unopened and inaccessible the political importance of Hongkong must continue to be paramount." A place of such importance requires a man of ability at the head of its administration. Delicate questions with the Chinese Authorities are not of infrequent occurrence. In the event of a war between European Powers whose shipping frequents these waters the preservation of neutrality would be the chief object, and, if necessary, the British, while in the event of a war in which England herself was involved in the importance of a strong administration in this Colony could not be overstated. We believe that the Civil Service is somewhat over-manned, especially in its lower ranks, and that there is a great waste of power. In a recent article we dwelt on the necessity of an inquiry on this subject, and the matter has since been mentioned in the Legislative Council, but if a Commission is appointed to enquire into the present state of the Civil Service, it will be difficult to prove that the future good administration should be the result of economy, make recommendations that would tend to weaken the Administration. No Colony in the British Empire calls for a stronger or more able Governor than Hongkong. If some of the men appointed have fallen short of the requirements, that is our misfortune, but to reduce the status of the Governor could not tend to meet matters and would almost certainly make them worse.

THE STAMP DUTY ON SHARE TRANSFERS.

The great bulk of the share business in Hongkong is effected by means of blank transfers. These as a rule are only completed and registered when this becomes necessary for the purpose of collecting dividends or when the shares fall into the hands of a bona fide investor who does not intend to resell them immediately. However many hands the shares may pass through between the time the blank transfer is executed and the time of its completion and registration, only one duty is paid to the Stamp Office, namely, ten cents for every \$100 or part thereof, computed on the market value of the shares on the day of stamping. At Singapore a different system is adopted and one which appears fairer to the Treasury and to offer greater safeguards to the share-dealing public. According to the schedule to the Singapore Stamp Act the duty is five cents on every hundred dollars when the name of the transfer is filled in by the transferor prior to execution, and 30 cents when the name of the transfer is not so filled in. A wide distinction is thus drawn between blank transfers and completed transfers, and the tendency must be to discourage the former class of instruments. It would be impracticable altogether to do away with blank transfers, which are necessary, when shares are lodged as collateral security for loans, but it is good policy to discourage them as much as possible there can be no doubt. It goes without saying that it is desirable that the register of every particular Company should be as nearly as possible a list of the persons actually holding the Company's stock. The Companies Ordinances indeed require that a list of the shareholders of every Company shall be lodged with the Registrar every year, but the lists sent in under present conditions contain the names of many persons whose interest in the re-

pective Companies has long ceased but who are still the registered proprietors of shares and no doubt there is much in the Mutual Settlement which might be copied in this Colony with advantage. It must not be forgotten, however, that the sphere of the Shanghai Municipality is considerably more municipal in nature and that it has no legislative functions. Thus whilst in the management of its roads, its post office, and the various branches of administration that make the place comfortable to live in, Shanghai may be much ahead of Hongkong, it is very far behind as regards the state of the law. It is not many weeks since a dispute is referred to the ownership of certain premises occupied by the China Merchants Steam Navigation Company led to the drafting of a pose of Chinese soldiers to the spot together with a mob of coolies from the Company's wharves, the breaking in of doors, and so forth, all of which would be considered disgraceful in any civilized country possessing an established Government. If in Hongkong our roads are kept in worse repair than in Shanghai and cost more money we have at all times the advantage of living under a system of law which commands public confidence and to all the residents, British, Chinese, and Foreign, are alike subject. In Shanghai there are many Courts as there are nationalities, each governed by a different system, and with the possibility of conflicting jurisdictions.

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THE QUARANTINE.

The Acting Governor has fulfilled his promise to appoint a Commission to inquire into the question of quarantine. The Constitution of the Commission leaves nothing to be desired, law, medicine, and commerce being well represented. An Indian contemporary, discussing the general question of quarantine, direct attention to the example of Malta. There is no country in the world says the *Times* of Malta, where the rigor of quarantine is carried to such excess, and where its results, being in an island, might be expected to be no humanly possible profit in Malta. Yet when direct attention is given to the subject, it is found that the Commission, which he was put in charge of a new prison distinguished from the present as it is in the extension of the present site as its own ground. That decision was accepted by Sir William D'Veoux in a short despatch to the Surveyor-General, who had the same little misunderstanding with regard to what actually happened in connection with this matter. The question asks "Will the Government lay upon the table the Commission's report on the subject, and a copy of any report which the committee may have made on the subject, and copies of the reports and proceedings of recent commissions on goal accommodation?" Your Excellency, there is a despatch from Mr. Fleming, the Secretary of State, a copy of which he promised would be laid on the table as soon as it was acknowledged by the Secretary of State, but I suppose, owing to Mr. Fleming's departure, this was not done. It contained only the recommendations of the Commission, direct attention to the creation of a new prison. In his despatch to the Secretary of State Sir William D'Veoux said that the future good administration should be the result of economy, make recommendations that would tend to weaken the Administration. No Colony in the British Empire calls for a stronger or more able Governor than Hongkong. If some of the men appointed have fallen short of the requirements, that is our misfortune, but to reduce the status of the Governor could not tend to meet matters and would almost certainly make them worse.

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So far as the inductive evidence of analogy is suffered to have weight, it is just as likely that the cholera germs do not live in the town which are breeding and the man under the influence of the disease. More especially is this so in the case of non-dividend paying Companies, and when there are still due on the shares the master becomes either a serious one for the original vendor. In the recent collapse in the Hongkong share market, which was almost general to make comparisons, and no doubt there is much in the Mutual Settlement which might be copied in this Colony with advantage. It must not be forgotten, however, that the sphere of the Shanghai Municipality is considerably more municipal in nature and that it has no legislative functions. Thus whilst in the management of its roads, its post office, and the various branches of administration that make the place comfortable to live in, Shanghai may be much ahead of Hongkong, it is very far behind as regards the state of the law. It is not many weeks since a dispute is referred to the ownership of certain premises occupied by the China Merchants Steam Navigation Company led to the drafting of a pose of Chinese soldiers to the spot together with a mob of coolies from the Company's wharves, the breaking in of doors, and so forth, all of which would be considered disgraceful in any civilized country possessing an established Government. If in Hongkong our roads are kept in worse repair than in Shanghai and cost more money we have at all times the advantage of living under a system of law which commands public confidence and to all the residents, British, Chinese, and Foreign, are alike subject. In Shanghai there are many Courts as there are nationalities, each governed by a different system, and with the possibility of conflicting jurisdictions.

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